

Interview 8
Ethnic Group: Caribbean (St. Vincent & the Grenadines)
Date: 1993
Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: Male
Age: 55
Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines
Marital status: married
Education: B.A.
Occupation: Accountant
Year of arrival: late 1950s or early 1960s
Children: daughter, 26; adopted son, 24

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: Who was the first one from your family to come to Canada?

R: My elder sister.

I: What year was that?

R: 1956 or 58.

I: How did she come?

R: She came as a domestic worker.

I: So why did you want to come to Canada?

R: To study - no other reason. I was a customs officer at home and I hadn't been in school since high school. I wanted to go on in my education, and I went to [university]. In commerce. I have a B. Com.

I: What did you know about Canada before you came?

R: Not a lot. I knew about the St. Lawrence River, the Prairies, we did geography in high school, but not much more than that.

I: Did you especially want to come to Montreal?

R: Well, I had roots here, and in those days it was more of a one language city.

I: Do you have relatives from St. Vincents who moved elsewhere around the world?

R: Yes, there are 9 of us, and most of us came here. My parents only came here two years ago and went back, but most of my brothers came here and left, and now I have only 3 brothers and a sister in Toronto, and another in Florida. My older brother went to England, and is now living in Sweden. Another sister went straight to England and she is a nurse there.

I: So how many relatives do you still have in St. Vincent?

R: Close relatives only my father. My mother recently died.

I: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived. Any problems

integrating?

R: There were definite problems and I lived with my sister and a friend and my main concern was to get an education and so I didn't socialize much. I played cricket and we played with people from other commonwealth countries, Jamaica, India, etc. and that was my only form of socialization then.

I: How many people did you know here in Montreal that you knew earlier in St. Vincent?

R: Quite a few, about 50, I'd say.

I: What was your experience with the community?

R: I was quite a loner. The girls that came in the domestic program had to work in somebody's home for a year, and they had little chance to get out. Usually they got every Thursday off and they would meet in somebody's home and celebrate birthdays, and just get together and chat. Most of the objective was just to go to school and work. I went to work in the day and did my degree at night.

I: The first place you lived in with your sister?

R: Yes.

I: How did you find your first place after you moved out from your sister's?

R: That was when I got married. And there was some trouble, some discrimination, when I was looking. There was one apartment and the guy showed it to me and he told me I couldn't afford it, it was very expensive. I said, "Never mind that, I am looking for an apartment I need some details." Obviously after that initial contact I didn't want to live there. Another place they told me that when I got there it was rented, and I later found out it was not. I eventually got an apartment rented from a doctor, a very wonderful guy, and I lived there 16 years until I bought my own home.

I: What year did you get married?

R: 1963.

I: Where did you meet your wife?

R: At home, before I came here. She came here in 1963 just to get married.

I: Was there a plan? You first planned to go home.

R: She wanted to go home after she came. She still doesn't like it here and wants to go back to live. (interruption of a phone call)

I: You were telling me about your wife.

R: Yes, I met her four or five years before I came here. I met her through her place.

I: Were you engaged before you came here?

R: No, I don't believe in engagements. No, I just knew her and then I came here and we corresponded and I asked her to marry me, and she said yes, and that was it.

I: Did she work when she came here?

R: Yes, she has already worked since she came. She works in [university in Montreal], at the Faculty of Music. And she has worked at the Faculty of Medicine, and that was the end, because she stopped working a few years ago.

I: How much contact do you have with other Vincentians here in Montreal?

R: Quite a lot, and I can phone my friends freely, but then my wife is not interested, and so I don't socialize a lot. There was a time when we attended parties and like that, but we still have a fair amount of contact.

I: Are you a regular church member?

R: Yes, I go to the Pentecostal church. I was an Anglican for years and I knew everybody there, I was the treasurer of the church, etc., but I gave that up and now, in this new church, I know people but not so much and I don't see them outside of the church.

I: If you look at your circle of friends over the years, would you say that most of your friends are Afro-Caribbean?

R: Absolutely, yes.

I: Are they from all different islands, or just Vincentians.

R: All different islands, I have very good Jamaican friends, Vincentian friends...

I: How did you meet your Caribbean friends?

R: Mostly through cricket. Because cricket is the number one game on the islands and when we come here we are glad to have the opportunity to meet others who play it. And I also met a lot going through school.

I: How was the cricket organized. Does it have to do with the various island associations, do they each have teams?

R: No, as a matter of fact, cricket was better organized when I first came here. It was once a national sport of Canada. And that came from Canada being one of the Commonwealth Countries.

I: So was it set up as a municipal activity?

R: Older people from other commonwealth countries who immigrated here, many of the English, some Caribbean, set up the leagues and kept the sport going. Its an amateur league, there is a cup but there is no money involved.

I: Were you ever a member of any other clubs, like Rotary or a political club?

R: Yes, I was active for a while in the Liberal Party, provincially, for three or four years. I was never interested in politics per se but I was interested in having a fair shake.

I: Do you have non Afro-Caribbean friends? Where do you meet them?

R: Mostly at work. One of my best friends was a guy who I worked with for 30 years, but he died 10 years ago. Another guy is from Ireland and we were good friends. But I wouldn't say that I have many.

I: How much contact do you have with St. Vincent now? How many times have you traveled back there since you came?

R: I would say 8 or 10 times.

I: Do you call your father now?

R: When my mother was alive we called at least once a month. Now not so much, because my father can't talk on the phone.

I: Did you sponsor any of your family to come to Canada?

R: Yes, my last sister. What happened was it was a chain reaction. My sister sponsored three of us, and then they sponsored several more and I sponsored the last one.

I: Do you ever consider moving back to St. Vincent?

R: Yes, and if my wife's health was better I would go back now. But my wife's kidneys don't work, she is on dialysis and she had open-heart surgery a few years ago. She needs the medical facilities here, and so we can't go back now.

I: Have you considered moving anywhere else in Canada or in North America?

R: No, not really, I am too entrenched here now. Sometimes the politics of separation here makes me feel like leaving, but it would be hard to do and I don't think I will.

I: Tell me about your family.

R: I have two children, a daughter 26, and an adopted son, 24.

I: Who lives in your household.

R: My wife, my daughter and myself.

I: Where is your son?

R: In New York, he came to us from New York and I adopted him, and he went back there when he grew up. I adopted him when he was 7. He is my wife's niece's son.

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: How old were you when you got married?

R: I was 26 she was 29. My first brother went to England and he is a teacher. Now he lives in Sweden. My sister who sponsored him, she left the domestic worker scheme after one year and became a high school teacher. She died about 8 years ago. Then I came, my next brother came as a student, and did engineering at [university], and then went to [university]. Finally he did a Masters in Education at [university], and he is a teacher now in Toronto. That's four. Another brother came who was sponsored by my sister, he worked as a conductor on the trains and then he moved to Florida. My next sister never came here, she is a nurse in England. Two other brothers came and they now live in Toronto, one works at the Bank, another works at a telecommunication company, and finally my sister, who also lives in Toronto.

I: So, you come from a large family and you have only two children. That's true of many of the people I interview. Why do you think that so many Caribbeans have very small families although they come from large families?

R: Well, we don't have the help from the family that people had in the islands. My parents had nine kids, I don't know how they did it, but they had domestic help living in, I feel that I have much better control over one or two kids than I could have over a large number, and I want to give my kids the very best that I can manage. So it works better.

I: What did your parents do in St. Vincent?

R: My father is a school teacher, a Headmaster at a good school, and my mother is a housewife.

I: Would your marriage have been different if you lived in the Grenadines?

R: I don't think so. I would have married the same girl that I know, and I think my wife would have wanted to work. She was already working when I married her. We would have been able to afford help in the house, and that would have made her life better. But I don't think we would have wanted a large family. It would be a less stressful life if we lived there, but here it is stressful and you have to work a lot, and cook, clean, etc. It would have been an easier life at home, but along the same lines that we have here. The housework that we do here we would not have had to do at home.

I: What about Canadian values, or Montreal values? Has the North American way of thinking influenced you and your wife in any way?

R: Yes and no, in some ways it makes me quite angry. There is this whole issue of how you can't punish your children, or discipline your children. I find that totally out of order. It is vastly out of order, and it is one of the main causes of the way things are today. You see kids on the bus, and things, being rude, and talking back to adults, that couldn't happen in our time. I really bemoan this point.

I: Can you give examples of intermarriage in St. Vincent and the Grenadines? What kind of a marriage would people think wasn't right.

R: We have no rules about whom a person can marry. Even marrying someone from another island there may be problems of different customs, different ways. For instance in St. Vincent we have a custom called 'nine mornings' where 9 days before Christmas, Dec. 16, we all get up around 3 in the morning and walk around the town and there is music and it is a little festival. You can imagine someone who isn't used to this thinking it odd to get up so early and walk around the town. But basically I don't like such marriages, some work but most don't. We are all equal according to God but it better if we don't intermarry.

I: Are your son and daughter married?

R: No, neither of them.

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community?

R: Well, divorce was sort of unheard of in our time. There were divorces I grant you but very, very few. We came up with a lot of church values, and the Bible is against divorce and I think that is the chief reason. It is changing here,

they became more successful, but they have more materially and people think well I don't have to do anything I don't want to do, I can get rid of this wife and have other girls around. So I think that material success has had a hand in that.

I: How upset would a person be if their child got a divorce?

R: I wouldn't be angry but I wouldn't like it. Obviously we would try very hard to help the couple fix up their marriage, but if they can't and divorce is the only alternative, well then...

I: What would be a good reason for divorce?

R: Problems of lack of not enough money, material reasons are not a good reason for divorce. If you get to the stage where your mate is seeing other people and the relationship has completely broken down. Biblically it is wrong, but it happens.

I: Tell me about a typical marriage in your culture. Is there a lot of communication between the couple does the mother and the father has distinct roles?

R: At home when I grew up the father was the sole breadwinner. This has changed, even in the islands now, and women go out to work. It is almost necessary for both parties to work now, if they wanted to own a home, for instance, and for West Indians, owning a home is a top priority. We would not be happy to live in an apartment all the days of our life, we want to have a home.

In the West Indians, because the man is the sole breadwinner, he does almost nothing at home. Especially if you can afford to hire some domestic help, everything is clean, the clothes are ready, the meals are delicious, and someone outside did your garden. It is quite different here. When I first came I still had those ideas, and I used the pretext that I was studying so I couldn't do any more. But that has changed. You have to work more closely with your wife here than you did in the West Indies because she is working too and there isn't anyone else to help you out. It is not fair to have the wife working and then come home and do all the domestic work too and you are doing nothing.

I: Since your wife is sick, have you had to take on more of it?

R: Just about all of it. I became much more aware of what needed to be done.

I: Does it primarily add stress and does it bring the couple more closely together to do work like this?

R: It does add to stress but it can be nice to do things together. I hardly go anywhere any more, because if my daughters isn't at home to stay with my wife I don't like to leave her alone.

I: What does your daughter do?

R: She is just finishing her education. She went to [university in Montreal] for a while and now she is finishing her M.A. in International Relations at [university in Ontario]. When she was in Montreal she did some part-time work at the [general hospital], and now she works there occasionally when she looks for a good job.

I: What are your ideas about the roles of men and women?

R: If my wife were well, and so on, I wouldn't do as much cooking and cleaning as I do. I feel it is my job to do the physical work outside. Like the gardening, clearing away the snow, and so on. I feel it is my responsibility because we men are physically stronger, but the chores inside should be left to the woman, or primarily to her. We should share them, with the physical labour more for the man where strength is needed.

I: Would a husband and wife discuss things together? Or would you just tell what your wife what you had decided, for a career change or something like that?

R: Well, it depends. If I clearly see what I want to do it's one thing, but if I really don't know what is best then I would like to talk with my wife a lot about it and get her views. I think women tend to discuss their views more than men, but I may be wrong.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Would you have wanted to have more children, or just those two?

R: Possibly maximum one or two more, but not more.

I: What did you basically want for your children?

R: I want them to know who God is. I don't know if you know about religion, and maybe this isn't exactly religion, but I do believe in life hereafter and in judgment of us, which is much more important than anything on this earth. I do believe that the Christian religion is the right path to take in life, and I hope that they will be guided by the things that are said in the Bible. And I want them to have as much education as possible.

I: If you can imagine the ideal career for your daughter and your son, what would it be?

R: My main concern is that they have an education and go as far as they possibly can. I have a B.A. and I work as an accountant, but they might do something different. It could be a doctor, nurse, lawyer, but go as far as you possibly can. That would be my dream for them.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: It will depend on age. The younger you are the less freedom you should have, and as you grow older your freedom should gradually increase until you are an adult and have total freedom. When I was young, you would get paddled by the teacher, that was okay. There was much more respect.

For example, my daughter went home when she was a year or a half and came back when she was about three. When she was back, one day we were walking along the road, and she said, 'daddy, why is it that nobody here says 'good morning'. And that was very significant to me, because at home whether you know a person or not it is just good respect and good manners to say 'good morning' - it doesn't take anything out of you. But I'm not sure that it isn't the same thing in the islands now as it is here. There is a complete breakdown of respect, even in the schools I hear. Unfortunately.

I: Does your wife have different aspirations for your children than you do?

R: No, I don't think so. If anything, she would stress the 'God' part of it more than I would.

I: And what about disciplining? Did she have different ideas about discipline than you?

R: No, we agree about that. And we believe in a spanking sometimes, even that, if it is needed.

I: When your children were small, did they sing any of the same songs and play the same games that you do, in the islands?

R: Well, some of them, the early education is left more to the mother and my wife taught a lot of things to my children. But also we did take an active part in the children's school here, and my wife taught all the kids in the class sometimes, about growing up in the Caribbean.

I: Did your children receive any formal or informal cultural education?

R: Like in school you mean? No, my kids didn't go to any special program. But we taught them at home, manners and how you should act in certain situations. One thing we did teach them all the time was to try to be helpful to other kids in school. I noticed that the teachers weren't always as helpful as they could be to immigrant kids, and we made sure that our daughter did help in situations like that. She went to the school right over there, and I always made sure that I was on top of the situation and at lunch time, we had lunch together, and I always told her to make sure - not that she shouldn't help Canadian kids if they needed some help but to watch out for the kids who had a runny nose, help them to wipe their nose and things like that.

I: How about things like African dance, or reggae?

R: Not particularly, my daughter knows calypso and she is very West Indian. In fact I was very happy about her reaction when we went home, she fit in easily, even though she was born here. She just loved the atmosphere, the warmth, and the friendliness. I think she is more West Indian than just Canadian. We cook and eat West Indians foods, mind you we eat Canadian foods too, but you know, just coming here there is a place that sells West Indians food just here so we can eat very West Indian here if we want to.

I: How and where would you hope that your children would meet their future spouses?

R: Just a respectful person, that is all I know. I prefer someone of an African background but we are not in a position where we choose a spouse for our children. I have known people who have tried, but I wouldn't try to.

I: At the time of marriage, would you expect your daughter and your son to be knowledgeable and experienced in sex?

R: Not necessarily experienced but knowledgeable. I know my son was involved with someone, and I wished it gone better for him. I'm not the type to question my daughter about are you or are you not, but you're not going to find a 26 years old who doesn't know what sex is.

I: Did you ever talk with her about sex?

R: Not me, no, but my mother (laughs) I mean her mother certainly did. I just try to warn her about how men are, (Interviewer laughs: 'stay away from them'). I'm not saying that, but in my home, my mother and my father never discussed this with me, and I have a little bit of discomfort doing this. Quite honestly.

I: What would a common reaction be in your community if a child told his parent that he was homosexual?

R: Outrage. There is slightly more tolerance maybe here in Montreal but basically I think shock and outrage would be the reaction.

I: So if your children wanted to talk to with someone about personal things, who would they talk to?

R: Well, it depends on how personal. If it is about sex I'm sure my daughter would talk to my mother, her mother first. She is a young lady now, she isn't a child anymore.

I: Do you think that your mother would have hoped for the same things for your kids that you do, or your father?

R: Basically I think it is the same. He was very strong for education, as I said he was a head master of a school, and he valued education strongly.

I: Was he religious?

R: Yes, as a matter of fact he gave up being head of the school and became an Anglican priest later.

I: What aspects of your culture do you wish to see instilled in your children and all children in the next generation?

R: I would say discipline and morals, respect, the importance of education.

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: How often do married people visit their parents and their in-laws here?

R: Difficult to say because my parents were never here. Well, my father spent 8 months in Toronto, and then came back with me. In the West Indies we would visit our parents and in-laws at least once a week. Over the years we would visit my wife's parents as often as we went home, about once every three years.

I: If they lived in Montreal?

R: Well, it depends upon proximity, where you live. I would think once or twice a week, all the holidays, birthdays, and things like that.

I: Would you have considered living with them?

R: They never lived on their own in Canada, with one of my brothers or sisters. They would prefer to live with a brother or sister but they would be taken care of, and if they lived in an apartment just because of crowding, someone would look after them. If they needed care, one of us would have taken them in.

I: When your son and daughters get married, how often do you expect to get visits from them?

R: That's completely up to them, I don't have any expectations. I tell my daughter if she has well behaved children, I want to see them as often as possible, but if they aren't trained I don't want to see them (laughs). By then I would have retired and will have more time for them.

I: If one of your children had financial difficulty, would you and your wife help them out?

R: Yes. Just like that. I am an accountant by profession, I wouldn't give them money just to clear expenses if they should have created them.

I: Did you know your grandparents?

R: My grandfather lived with us and died in our house. I knew my mother's mother, she died while I was up here.

V. RELATIONS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

I: How often do you speak to your brothers and sisters?

R: Well, the one in Sweden only once or twice a year. He generally calls. My English ones two or three times a year. The Canadians once regularly, maybe one or twice a month.

I: How often do you see your relatives?

R: Not very often, but everyone was home for the funeral two weeks ago, and those in Toronto I see at least twice a year, the one in England I was in 1991 and then again last week.

I: So a death in the family would bring everyone together?

R: Not necessarily any death, but the death of our father or mother, certainly. When my sister died here, all of us got together except my brother in Sweden.

I: Are there any other occasions that would bring everyone together?

R: A wedding would, for instance, the ones in the area attended each others weddings.

I: What occasions bring the whole family together?

R: It's hard to say, if someone comes for a visit we make an effort to all get together. And if we are in Toronto at Christmas time or something everyone will get together, but sometimes we just visit the different ones separately. Sometimes we have summer vacations down there, and so on.

I: Is there anyone in the family who takes responsibility to get everyone together?

R: No, it all depends on the occasion, there is no one particular person.

I: Do you help each other?

R: Yes, if your brother needs some money you might lend it, or even go to a bank and get it. I can't think of anything that one might need that the others

would give them.

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: What are the main attitudes of your community toward the family?

R: Very family oriented, they are strong on teaching the old disciplines.

I: What do you think about family sizes, smaller here than in the islands?

R: I do think that there are too many illegitimate children in the islands.

I: What about here, you see some here too.

R: Far, far too many.

I: What are the reasons for illegitimacy?

R: Television is one reason. They get too much exposure to sex, all these pornographic movies and magazines that they have about the place - I think that has an effect.

I: What about in the islands?

R: They watch as much television as we do.

I: Before television?

R: It's probably due to the lack of education, sex education. Now because of AIDS we have it.

I: Do you know how many people from St. Vincent and the Grenadines are in Canada?

I: I suppose a few thousands.

I: Before you migrated here, what was the expectation about integrating into the greater Montreal Community?

R: I knew I would meet some West Indian here.

I: Would you say that West Indians are doing well here, as compared to other countries?

R: A lot of West Indians the standard of education they had was not very high. But many got good jobs and had an easy life here and they lost all values.

I: Does your community have any problems with other ethnic groups in Canada?

R: Not that I know of. I hear things about Haitians, but I haven't experienced anything. We have our little rivalries, but it is good natured, more like sports competition.

I: Would your life have been different if you stayed in St. Vincent?

R: I would definitely have been an established civil servant. No doubt about it. I wouldn't say I would have a higher standard of living, but I would have lived with much less stress. I would be able to afford someone working in the house, we could have afforded a nice house, and like that.

I: Does it seem to you that Canada is changing or Montreal is changing?

R: Certainly, in language and in politics. I took French courses at the government expense, and I work with the federal government. I speak easily and communicate well in French now, and my understanding is not as good as it can be, but I can survive. My daughter is completely bilingual.

I: What is distinctive about your family?

R: We go to church as often as possible, we eat west Indian food, curried goat, and that.

I: Newspapers?

R: Gazette, and my paper from St. Vincent.

I: Who do you look toward for leadership?

R: I was inspired by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Mahatma Gandhi. I like Desmond Tutu. I admire Trudeau, and I don't think we have any great leaders since him.

I: How important is it to you that the St. Vincent's association stay independent. Suppose that all the islands could get together and pool their resources and form a common association. Would you like that?

R: Yes, I think it would be better for us. We were once Federated and I think if we could set the example that would help. There is a basic insularity, and some people think that their island is so different.

I: Do you envision a time when your community will be assimilated into a wider West Indies association now?

R: I don't know I used to be involved in these issues but now since my wife is sick, I leave it to others.

I: How do you feel about the identity known as Black?

R: I have no problems with it. We are of African descent.

I: What is your personal identity?

R: First I'm a Vincentian, and a Canadian too. I'm of African descent, or Black. You could use words like 'I'm an honest person' but that wouldn't mean much unless the person really knew you.